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Tazewell County Board

*Continuing a Family Tradition of Community Service*

April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2010

**April ASO Magazine Column**

## **Grant, the Journalist and the Judgement**

***"Tell me what brand of whiskey that Grant drinks. I would like to send a barrel of it to my other generals."* Abraham Lincoln**

We all know the quote above and the story that this was Lincoln's response to individuals wanting to remove General Ulysses S. Grant from his leadership position because of his rumored over-drinking. And while this is a great story, the actual truth is somewhat different. This is the true story of what Lincoln did about the rumors of General Grants excessive drinking and from this story we can learn a lot about the mistakes of cover-ups, the responsibilities of Journalist, and benefits that can be awarded to individuals that look beyond others people's faults and see the potential greatness within.

General Ulysses S. Grant did have a drinking problem. It first arose after the Mexican War when he was stationed in California, far away from his new wife and infant children. The work he was assigned was trivial and boring. This boredom combined with longing for his family led to a deep depression and his drinking. While the official record shows he abruptly resigned with no explanation, rumors persisted in the Army for years that his commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Robert C. Buchanan, found him intoxicated on duty and offered him the choice between resignation or court-martial. The rumors would chase him throughout his life, as would also the true drinking problems. When his family was near, he would not drink. And while there is no proof that he was ever intoxicated around the time of any engagement during the Civil War, when his family was not with him his depression would come back and so would the drinking.

As the war continued into its third year, the conflict was looking more and more lost for the Union. General Grant found himself with the challenge of capturing the heavily fortified town of Vicksburg, Mississippi. The natural defenses of the city were ideal, earning it the nickname "*The Gibraltar of the Confederacy*." It was located on a high bluff overlooking a horseshoe-shaped bend in the river making it almost impossible to approach by ship and the land around it was either a practically impenetrable swamp or had many streams and poor country roads with widespread winter flooding. Since November of 1862, General Grant had been working on his plans to capture this key city.

As Grant was working on this problem, the rumors of his past drinking were making their rounds again. The high casualties of his last major engagement, the Battle of Shiloh in April of 1862, had demanded explanation and many put the blame on Grant. While some questioned his poor judgment with the lack of a proper defense plan, others spread the rumor of his drinking problems of the past and insinuated that he was drunk during the conflict. Major-General John A. McClernand and Major-General Charles S. Hamilton, both under Grants command, reported Grants drinking as a problem, with McClernand reporting that Grant was "*gloriously drunk*" on several occasions and Hamilton had claimed "*Grant is a drunkard*". Both McClernand and Hamilton were seeking promotion in the army at the time of these allegations. Several newspapers got into the action with the *Cincinnati Commercial* editor, Murat Halstead, railing that "*Our whole Army of the Mississippi is being wasted by a foolish, drunken, stupid Grant*". Lincoln was getting pressure that something needed to be done.

Charles Anderson Dana was a Journalist by trade, writing for the New York Tribune for over fifteen years and rising to the position of Managing Editor. He used this position to actively promote the anti-slavery cause, seeming to shape the paper's policy at a time when the owner and later a leading voice in the movement, Horace Greeley, was undecided and vacillating. Around this time in 1862, the newspaper asked for his resignation and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton immediately made him a special investigating agent of the War Department. Dana carried with him a special cipher that only Stanton and Lincoln could read. It was to him Lincoln turned and charge with the responsibility of determining if these rumors were true. He was ordered to visit Grant during the Vicksburg Campaign and that if he found Grant to be a drunk as was claimed, to send a message to Stanton and Lincoln and they would have Grant removed immediately. No trial, no conversation; Dana was solely the judge of was Grant going to remain in his position or not.

Before Dana reached Grant's headquarters, Grant's Chief-of-Staff, John A Rawlins, and Inspector General, James Harrison, had already heard what the purpose of Dana's visit was. They talked about what should and should not be done to protect their boss. What they decided is usually the best course of action in these scenarios, but is rarely the route chosen. Harrison describes it as *"it was finally decided that he was to have access to everything, favorable and unfavorable, official or personal...With plenty of enemies about to bring him both truth and exaggerations, the worst tactics would be to arouse his suspicions by attempting concealment. A wise decision and fully endorsed by Grant."*

The result of this decision? A few weeks after arriving in Grant's camp he was included on a reconnaissance trip with Grant and Admiral Porter up the Yazoo River aboard the Admiral's flagship, the Blackhawk. What he witnessed was Grant *"getting so stupidly drunk as the immortal nature of man would allow; but the next day he came out fresh as a rose, without any trace of the spree he had just passed through. So it was on two or three occasions of the sort and when it was all over, no outsider would have suspected such things had been."* If Dana did what he had been sent to do, a telegram in secret code intended for President Lincoln would be on its way as soon as the Blackhawk landed. As a Professional Journalist who had just witnessed a sensational story, he could have easily turned out another great editorial and made an even larger name for himself as an investigative reporter.

What he did though was nothing. He had decided to place his faith in Grant and wanted nothing more than to see the Union win the war. At the end of the Vicksburg Campaign, which turned out to be a huge success and monumental victory for not only the Union but also Grant's leadership abilities, he wrote to Stanton to report that Grant did have a drinking problem but that his staff and family had it under control.

What kept him from calling Grant out? What was it gave him so much faith in Grant? We may never know, but I have to believe that he found it by having unfiltered access to Grant and that Rawlins and Harrison's decision not to censor him made the difference. When Dana first met Grant before the campaign and his assignment to spy on him, he described Grant as having *"simple manors"* and that he was *"straightforward, cordial, and unpretending"*. He now described Grant to Stanton and Lincoln as *"an uncommon fellow – the most modest, most disinterested, and the most honest man I ever knew, with a temper that nothing could disturb, and a judgment that was judicial in its comprehensiveness and wisdom."*

Just imagine how this episode would play out today. And imagine the results. Not only would the Union have lost its winning General in Grant, but also a case could easily be made for the other great Generals that came into power or continued in power only through Grant's faith in them and their abilities would have also been lost; General's Sherman, Sheridan, Thomas, Meade and many others.

My political lesson from this; all too often in today's political world we see individuals run campaigns with nothing more than digging the dirt on their opponents. They bring very little to the table themselves but instead run a behind the scenes, whisper campaign of *"do you know what so-and-so did?"* Add to this a little exaggeration and embellishment and you can really get a firestorm started. And the greatest part is you really do not have to be very smart, or hold a high record of trustworthiness, or even have factual information to run this kind of campaign. All you need is a good piece of gossip and a public that is not

interested in asking questions. The challenge for those of us that are smarter than to be persuaded by this reckless style of campaigning is to look deeper at the individuals involved. As was the case with Grant, it is easy to find the faults but takes more time and effort to see the potential that lies within.

That lesson was a hallmark trait of Abraham Lincoln; one that he used continuously throughout his Presidency and that has been recognized as one of his best qualities as a leader. It also is one of the characteristics that seem to be lacking today. Too many of us have become all too quick to judge and condemn individuals for past actions and all too slow to look deeper at the issues they are discussing. You can blame this on the 24 hour news media, or the fact that we as a society do not want to pay attention to the hard details but rather just bring out a new scandal, but regardless of the cause for this rush to judgment mentality, I hope to illustrate with this month's Political Column what the possibilities are if we can change this mentality. Next time you hear a great piece of gossip, just wonder to yourself what potential Grant you are about to through to the curb.

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